

# **One EASE E-Link**

**New Jersey's Pursuit To Establish an  
Electronic, Multi-Tooled Network for the  
Delivery of Coordinated Social, Health, and  
Employment Services.**

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## **I. Overview of System Initiatives and Their Objectives**

### **State of New Jersey - One EASE E-Link**

#### **A. Background**

New Jersey's vast social service system has always been thought of by consumers and providers alike as fragmented, dispersed, and diffuse; thereby making adequate communication and information sharing among its many service delivery agents frustrating and difficult. As it has come to exist through categorical funding streams and agency organizational structures, the current system hinders the formation of a comprehensive, accessible, coordinated, and holistic service delivery system to individuals and families in need of support and assistance.

New Jersey, like many other states, has an extensive investment in its system which includes state, county, municipal offices, institutions, private non-profit providers, and civic and religious organizations - all supplying a diverse range of services from housing assistance to job placement to mental health counseling. Communication between service organizations is important and necessary but often cumbersome and difficult to achieve. Frequently, consumers seeking help are left on their own to navigate the frustrating and confusing maze of agencies and services in order to find, qualify for, apply for, and ultimately receive whatever mix of services they or their families need. Once receiving services, they are regularly faced with conflicting advice and service plans from the different providers.

Funding and organizational barriers, in addition to an inability to sustain long-term systemic projects, have always frustrated those anxious for change. Yet, now more than ever, a better-coordinated service delivery system has become absolutely necessary for

the future sustainability of the social services infrastructure. In order to provide necessary services to customers within a changing fiscal environment, enhanced coordination and efforts to maximize positive customer outcomes are paramount.

The need for service integration has frequently been cited as a top administrative priority but has been difficult and elusive to achieve. Past attempts have centered around the concepts of physical co-location, multiagency case conferencing and development of interdepartmental/agency work groups and memorandum of understandings for and around specific programs and services. Such efforts as School-Based Youth Services Program<sup>1</sup> and Case Assessment Resource Teams<sup>2</sup> (C.A.R.T.) are illustrations of the efforts that have been made in New Jersey. But much more needs to be done. Today, advanced telecommunications technology has provided the necessary tools through which New Jersey can manage casework, share information, make referrals, report data, and provide universal access to services for those families and individuals in need - creating a "virtual" one-stop-shopping social service delivery system.

Overall, One EASE E-Link (OEL) is an initiative which uses this progressive technology to structure and coordinate the service delivery system through integrated electronic communication and information sharing, referral, case management and data reporting - all at the central point of service delivery - the front-line worker in the neighborhood. The physical workstation requirements and planning process were designed to assist state, local, public, and private non-profit agencies and organizations to build new cooperative relationships using multimedia technology as an every day tool. Additionally, the initiative complements efforts currently being developed to move the state's child welfare and public assistance programs toward a management information and intake system which will use client server and internet technology to ensure

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<sup>1</sup> School Based Youth Services Programs target adolescents in high schools throughout New Jersey to help them stay in school and be substance abuse-free. Services include, but are not limited to, counseling, health-related, pregnancy prevention, learning support and recreational services.

<sup>2</sup> Case Assessment Resource Team is a multidisciplinary team of professionals and family members working together to develop the least restrictive, most appropriate service plan for children with serious emotional needs.

maximum connectivity with entities outside of the traditional state child welfare district office and/or public assistance agency. The OEL initiative expands this connectivity even further by creating county level-wide area networks comprised of a multitude of public and private non-profit agencies and organizations.

## **B. Objectives**

Designing a better service delivery system to (a) respond to the goals of enhancing state and local service coordination, (b) provide quicker and more universal access to services for individuals and families, and (c) capture timely and comprehensive data for responding to many important needs and policy issues. All of these are fundamental guiding principals, which have been taken into account in the design of the OEL initiative. Overall, the new system must:

1. Help agencies and organizations redefine their roles as consumer-oriented service delivery agents without being threatening or dictatorial. It must promote teamwork over time as trust and understanding support long-term systemic change.
2. Allow for a degree of local variation and generate local interest and support. The local community, especially public and private front line workers, must have ownership of the effort in order to "buy-in."
3. Recognize and consider the cultural, geographic, language, gender, and professional diversity of both consumers and providers in its development.
4. Balance the needs of three key constituencies: consumers, front-line workers, and administrators.
5. Empower front-line workers to advocate, act, make decisions, make agreements, and access resources on behalf of the individuals and families they are serving.

6. Capture information on outcomes, demographics, resource consumption, and policy issues to enable administrators to manage effectively.
7. Be able to pay for itself over time. Resources allocated must be used in the short term to initiate the network and in the long term to support and maintain the health, viability, and security of the network.
8. Develop in a way that maintains or enhances equity of access to services, protection of privacy, security, confidentiality, and integrity of service delivery.
9. Provide maximum user friendliness, including appropriate and necessary systems management, training, and orientation.
10. Take into account the reality of decentralized, dispersed, user-oriented automation with the need for some measure of centralized, flexible policy direction and oversight.

### **C. The Initiative**

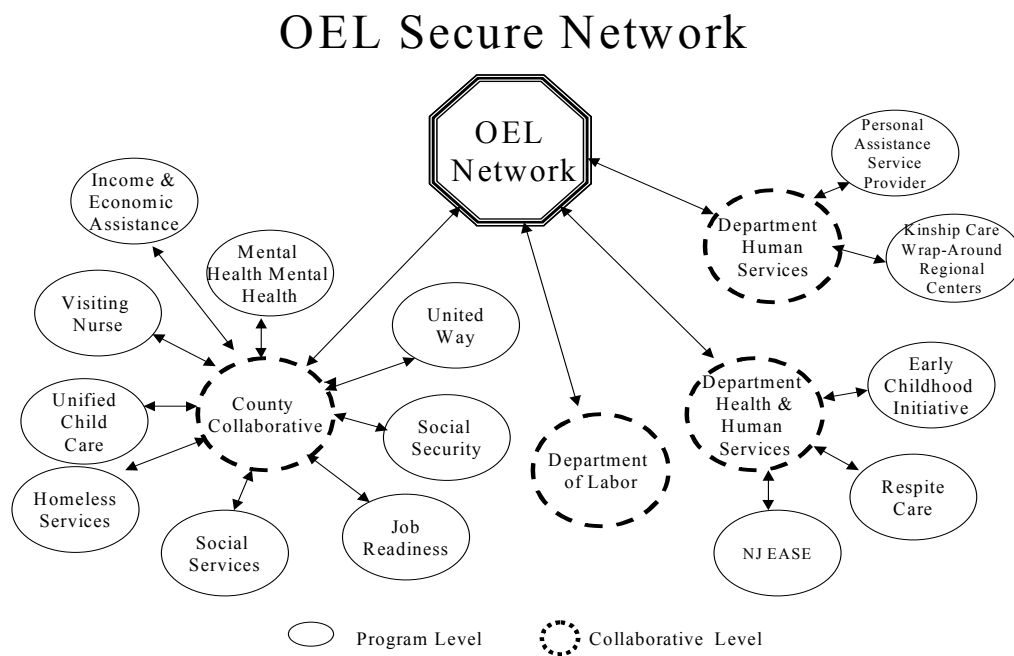
OEL is a unique collaboration of state, county, and private non-profit human service providers united to establish and support an electronic, multitool network for the delivery of coordinated social, health, and employment services. The OEL coordinated service bundle includes a web site with secure, encrypted e-mail, discussion forums, a document library, an easy to use eligibility screening tool, and case management software. Built on a business to business model, OEL links government, county, and private non-profit agencies together utilizing a Public Key Infrastructure<sup>3</sup> (PKI) behind a secure firewall to share consensual client information, coordinate services, reduce redundancy, and effectively marshal resources at the both the state and county level to serve families in the state of New Jersey.

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<sup>3</sup> PKI is the comprehensive system required to ensure electronic business communication incorporating digital signatures and encryption technology.

In 1995, the New Jersey State Departments of Health and Senior Services (DHSS), Human Services (DHS), and Labor (DOL) began a joint effort to coordinate their individual technology initiatives to improve service delivery to their respective target populations. Pilot testing of the initiative was conducted in Atlantic and Cape May counties for approximately one and half years prior to implementation. In December of 1997, the resulting OEL strategy became operational. The OEL planning and implementation guidelines were then released to all counties statewide and an invitation for participation was issued. One-time seed funding in the amount of \$288,000 for planning and implementation activities was allocated to counties that committed to build, implement, and support a community-based collaborative of local and county service providers to actively participate in OEL.

Figure 1:



Seventeen of 21 counties in New Jersey are currently participating in the implementation phase of OEL. Three of the remaining counties are in the evaluation process and one is in the pre-contract phase. At the county collaborative level, the implementation process involves: the purchase, distribution, and installation of hardware; distribution of groupware and digital security certificates; case management application (rollout); the benefits screening application; and training of all OEL users. Each member agency must also secure independent Internet access. The next steps in the process include the release of the web-enabled case management application, customization of the software and development of protocols to accommodate the distinct needs of the involved departments and agencies. Further specialized training for helpdesk, technical, and program staff is also planned. As of September 2001, there are 920 service providers and 3,434 individual users in the OEL network.

## **II. Obstacles Encountered and Responses to These Obstacles**

### **A. State of New Jersey**

William G. Kowalski, Director, OEL

#### **Integration into the business process**

Six major obstacles were encountered while attempting to integrate OEL into the business process.

##### **1) Leadership “buy-in”:**

Success depended upon total buy-in of top state management both at the executive level and department level. Without executive direction, resources would not follow the initiative. Without departmental commitment and consensus, focus would splinter and competition would soon undermine cohesion.

**Response:** DHS, DOL, and DHSS recognized that they served a shared pool of social service providers. The three departments recognized the benefits of creating a secure business infrastructure in which information and client data could move seamlessly between state, county, and private non-profit agencies.

The vision was embraced and DHS, DOL, and DHSS created a power point presentation that outlined the fundamental design of a business to business framework, an innovative application for government. A county-based model was proposed, and potential service benefits for residents, service providers, county, and state agencies were highlighted.

The presentation was made to the governor and the governor's cabinet. The event was a success and approval secured to enable the project to go forward.

The OEL initiative requires constant, vigilant energy to solicit participation and maintain leadership buy-in. It is a battle that is not always won.

## **2) Confidentiality:**

Each program of a state, county, and/or provider functions within a framework of laws and regulations concerning the confidentiality of consumer information. In many instances, these laws are conflicting. From a technical standpoint it has been a difficult and complicated process to develop a system of security requirements that allow for the consensual sharing of information at the level that is needed to develop coordinated services for clients. Many service providers have cited confidentiality and/or the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA) regulations as a barrier to participating in any type of shared client database. Mental health agencies cite federal as well as state statutes (N.J.S.A. 30:24.3) that limit the sharing of client information and require in most instances written consent by the client for release of information. Agencies say that information can only be shared with agencies directly involved in the medical care and treatment of said individual or by court order. The agency administering food stamps cites federal regulations<sup>4</sup> that limit disclosure of information obtained from food stamp applicants to the following:

1. Persons directly connected with Food Stamp Program, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), General Assistance, or Social Security Income.
2. Persons directly connected with wage-matching or alien verification.
3. Persons directly connected with child support enforcement.
4. Law enforcement agencies that are investigating Food Stamp program violations.
5. School officials, for the purpose of verifying eligibility for free or reduced price lunches.

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<sup>4</sup> See Title 7 of the Code of Federal Regulations, sections 272.1 (c) (1) and 273.22 (7).

This issue must be continually addressed in order to coordinate services that cross categorical funding lines and/or organizational requirements.

**Response:** The need to create a secure environment for shared client and program data was one of the most pressing issues for designing OEL on a county-based collaborative. It was felt that at the community level, protocols would be developed for the sharing of information among and between agencies. The local collaboratives were able to identify those agencies that already had written agreements for the sharing of client information. Said agencies would be the easiest, in principle, to adopt electronic sharing of information. The collaboratives were also able to identify whether agency confidentiality policy was based on statute, regulation, or internal agency policy. This process would enable some degree of information sharing to begin at the local level while state and/or federal issues were being resolved.

Given the complexity of the issue, it was decided to move incrementally. For example, efforts were concentrated on those agencies that already had an agreement to share information, especially where it was mandated, as it was for TANF and Labor-funded programs. Each collaborative also developed client "Release of Information" forms to resolve some of the confidentiality issues that were based on statute and/or regulations.

The decision to go with Public Key Infrastructure (PKI) was also made to help alleviate some of the security issues around confidentiality. That decision, made several years ago, has turned out to be somewhat serendipitous given the promulgation of the HIPAA privacy regulations.

### **3) Cultural change:**

Within the field of human services there has been a resistance to the introduction of technology, and this resistance is exacerbated when several new technologies are introduced simultaneously.

**Response:** The OEL strategy was to develop a cadre of super users to assist in the transition to the new technology. At the collaborative program level, OEL was often an end user's first experience with technology. As the OEL initiative reaches what is considered the critical mass, technological competence will become a necessity not a luxury.

#### **4) Turf issues:**

Many service providers feel their clients are literally "their" clients and, hence, want to maintain complete control of all services provided and are unwilling to share information.

**Response:** This was another reason to support the local collaborative process. Peer pressure and planning at the community level would have a significant impact on this issue.

#### **5) System integration:**

Federal and state funding streams have historically limited program scope and target populations to be served resulting in isolated service silos in the community. There are still many siloed systems that, until system integration is achieved, cause end users to do double data entry and re-enforce a bifurcated service delivery system. Additionally, federal and state mandates continue to encourage separate systems because of categorical funding for technology. Front line workers and management resist a technology that creates additional duplicative work and does not satisfy the primary business needs of the agency.

**Response:** Initially, the OEL approach was to show that the benefits of a real time case management tracking system out weighed the double data entry issue. For some agencies, especially TANF and Labor, this was acceptable if the double data entry issue was time limited with a specific date for resolution. Agencies that did not have large

legacy systems were receptive to replacing their existing system with the OEL applications. OEL did not specify whether an existing legacy system should be replaced. Each agency determined what was the best approach to achieve the OEL goal of shared client database. For some it would be developing an interface or bridge to their existing system, for others an OEL application might replace an existing system, and for others it would become their first system. However, in order for the goals of the OEL initiative to be achieved, integration must happen.

#### **6) State and local relationships:**

A cooperative atmosphere, one of trust and equal responsibility at the state and local collaborative level, must exist in order to achieve integration into the business process.

**Response:** The state made available \$288,000 in seed money to the counties for the creation of local collaboratives. Through a contracting process, spending parameters were set that allowed for considerable flexibility. This flexibility acknowledged the uniqueness of the local community-based providers and county infrastructures. In addition, state positions were created to assist, support, and assess the progress of the local collaboratives. These OEL liaison staff are commonly perceived as "marketing representatives." The OEL initiative requires constant care and continual honing of services to meet ever changing social and political climate, community needs, and technological advances.

## **Technology**

There were five obstacles identified relative to technology:

### **1) Training:**

It has been estimated that the private sector spends 60 percent of its technology-related funds on training, 30 percent on software and 10 percent on hardware. Traditionally, government's allocation of funds is the reverse, 10 percent training, 30 percent software and 60 percent hardware. The training needs of the OEL members varied greatly, from small agencies that had staff with no experience in basic technology to large agencies with sophisticated systems and a training budget. Additionally, training issues were magnified by the design of the OEL initiative, which sought to utilize leading-edge technology and introduced several new applications at once.

**Response:** At the county collaborative level, a portion of the OEL seed money was allocated for training. At the state level, funds were reserved for “knowledge transfer” training. This was training that would eventually enable the state and to some degree the counties to assume support of the OEL applications.

### **2) Security:**

Because sensitive client information was to be shared and, at times, communicated via the web, security was a paramount issue.

**Response:** OEL established security protocols that included utilization of PKI and applications that had the ability to structure security at various levels and in some situations down to a single data element. All system applications had to have the ability to apply various security levels. Early in the initiative, PKI was recognized as a key component of the OEL security infrastructure. This was a relatively new technology for

management information system staff and especially the end users and created significant training and marketing issues.

### **3) System integration:**

Integration is so critical it is repeated here as an obstacle (previously cited under integration into the business process). Applications must have the ability to interface and/or bridge to existing legacy systems. Without the ability to share information at the back end, true coordination of services through technology will not happen. The issues are numerous and costs are high.

**Response:** There has been considerable activity relative to data integration, but the actual integration of existing data bases (legacy systems) has not occurred. Integration has occurred where programs, which had smaller systems, had an OEL application replace their existing system. DHSS is implementing replacement for three programs: Statewide Respite Care, Easy Access Single Entry,<sup>5</sup> and Early Intervention Services. The integration of large legacy systems involves numerous federal and state agencies for funding and policy considerations. Several activities have taken place to begin that process. Some of those activities are identified under federal funding policies.

### **4) Rapid change:**

Technology is changing so quickly that some system designs had to be changed before implementation was complete. Some systems became outmoded shortly after implementation.

**Response:** OEL strives to use leading edge technology and only technology that meets industry standards, hopefully reducing the need to change systems.

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<sup>5</sup> Known as NJEASE, this program provides various services to senior citizens.

## **5) Maintaining existing system:**

Systems do not change overnight. While new systems, applications, and infrastructure are being introduced the existing must be maintained, draining both financial and manpower resources. This creates conflict and competing priorities.

**Response:** OEL attempted to introduce applications and processes that would replace existing systems within a limited amount of time and, at the same time, offer significant enhancements. Attempt is the operative word.

## **Resources**

There were three obstacles identified relative to resources.

### **1) Federal funding policies:**

Each program office at the federal level provides requirements for data and information systems that appear to be independent and in some cases inconsistent with other program offices; and, unlike block grants which have been introduced in many program areas, funding for IT continues to be basically categorical. For example, the creation of a data warehouse would assist greatly in achieving integration and data sharing. New Jersey sought to develop a data warehouse that was considered multioperative, (a project that required various federal funding sources). Since the data warehouse would be for Medicaid, TANF, and Food Stamps, the state had to negotiate with the Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA), the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), and the U.S. Department of Agriculture Office of Food and Nutrition Services (FNS). The state originally wanted a DHS enterprise data warehouse. However, HCFA would not provide enhanced federal financial participation for such a project unless it was a Medical Management Information System. Negotiations were required to be conducted through ACF, thus eliminating direct involvement with HCFA. Justification for funding of the Food Stamp Program had to be submitted separately to FNS. The federal agencies

involved, which also included Child Support, appeared to push funding obligations to one another. Justifications for funding enhancements were predicated on developing a "stovepipe" approach. In another example, OEL attempted to use some Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System dollars to provide hardware to community agencies that were under contract with the state and provided services to children in need. The process for justification and the cost allocation plan required by ACF was a deterrent to collaboration and cost effectiveness. These examples of "stovepipe" funding for technology underscore why the progress towards data integration has been so slow.

**Response:** Researched various possibilities of cost allocation. Recommendations are articulated in section III.

## **2) Finding dollars:**

Funding for IT in government does not get the emphasis that is needed. Too few resources are committed to implement technologies that are required to build coordinated and integrated systems.

**Response:** Initially OEL was able to collapse certain funding streams of the three major departments that were partners in the initiative. This funding strategy enabled the pilot in Atlantic and Cape May counties to begin. Due to the relative success of the pilot, DHS was able to secure funding and expand the project. Maintaining funding for the initiative has been difficult because limited IT dollars are normally relegated to maintaining core business functions of the enterprise. Until OEL becomes an integral part of the business process, securing funding will remain a challenge. Collaboratives have been structured to be free standing through the collection of fees. However, at this time even with the collection of fees most are subsidized to a degree by their county. OEL continues to seek alternative funding sources and is currently researching the possibility of ads on the portal and the collaborative's home page.

### **3) People:**

Finding IT staff in government with the skill sets necessary to implement and administer the technologies required for the OEL initiative has been difficult. Additionally, the lower government pay scale has made it difficult to retain individuals that possess the technical expertise needed to support the enterprise.

**Response:** It is not within the purview of this initiative to address this issue. However, due to the scope and belief in the project, OEL has been able to attract and maintain highly skilled individuals to work on the initiative.

### **B. Collaborative Responses**

#### **Gloucester County One EASE E-Link**

John H. Fisher, III, Executive Board Chairperson

Steven Sweeney, Freeholder Director

Kathryn Stalter-Allen, OEL Project Manager

#### **Issue 1: Vision**

OEL is a bold idea. At the most fundamental level, we are creating a business environment for social services agencies—an online venue where all of the major activities of service agencies will take place in a new and more efficient way. OEL will make it possible to give real substance to a vision of the services system that has been around for at least 30 years.

#### **Obstacle:**

1. From the onset, local collaboratives were skeptical of a universal, technology-based system. Many were fearful of yet, another state-based initiative that would just touch on their basic needs and never be further developed.

2. It was also difficult for front line workers to think “outside the box.” Social service agencies, along with their staff, felt afraid and confused at a new way of doing business. A way in which they had no prior experience or familiarity.

**Response:** At a local level, agencies and staff members had constant reinforcement about OEL, how it would affect their lives and the way they do business. Gloucester County had already been benefiting from this initiative. Being one of the later collaboratives to join this project, Gloucester was able to track the progress and success of OEL in other regions. Local officials were very aware of what areas needed to be further developed and what areas of OEL needed to be clarified to put social services professionals at ease. In June of 1999 Gloucester’s OEL held an **OEL KICK-OFF**. This was a festive, extremely informative event that included over 100 local providers. OEL was presented using simulated client cases and demonstrated how all social service workers would be able to follow their clients, helping them to navigate the system – using the “no wrong door” approach. During this time, county freeholders, administrators and other local officials were able to broaden the agencies' visions – helping everyone to think "outside the box.”

OEL staff and county officials continue to put area providers at ease. Knowing that our county has both a fiscal and emotional "buy-in" to this state-of-the-art way of doing business, providers feel comfortable knowing that their time, effort, and dollars vested in this initiative will be rewarded.

## **Issue 2:      Funding**

The original “start-up” funds for OEL seemed appropriate at the time. We guesstimated that these funds would allow for one year of planning prior to implementing OEL and disseminating hardware and software. The OEL executive board also decided on a ***fee for service*** plan that would allow OEL to fiscally sustain itself after the seed money had been exhausted.

**Obstacle:**

The idea that local, state, federal, and private non-profit social service agencies “pay for service” was a new concept never before implemented in our community.

**Response:** Gloucester County was able to benefit from watching other collaboratives struggle for OEL annual fees and reviewed this struggle in an open forum type of communication. Surveying small, private non-profit agencies as well as more fiscally sound providers proved to be an asset. Gloucester’s OEL was able to strategize a fair and equitable cost for all providers and this allowed Gloucester’s OEL executive board and future funding committee to establish a \$1,000 per year fee that gave all agencies an affordable rate and equal access to the initiative. This fee structure also encouraged agencies to involve all of their front line workers as well as case managers, supervisors, administrators, and support staff. Using a flat fee approach would not fiscally discourage any agency from limiting staff members. By using a flat fee approach, programs were able to enroll all their staff. OEL was developed with the view that the more users and the more information within the system, the more successful and beneficial it would become.

To date, Gloucester’s OEL has successfully collected fees for the calendar year 2001. It has also been able to fiscally sustain itself since the commencement of its contract with the state. It is our vision that as providers continue to join OEL, (which will in turn generate more revenue) the actual fees will decrease, making it even more desirable to join this initiative.

**Issue 3: Confidentiality**

All social service agencies strive to serve their clients in the most beneficial and effective manner. This includes providing a level of dignity and confidentiality to all who request service. Obviously, this was an issue of great concern to our area organizations.

**Obstacle:**

Fear and a lack of knowledge were in the foreground during the development of this particular part of OEL. Providers needed to know:

- Who would have access to our client information?
  - What does it mean to ‘share’ information?
  - How do I protect my client?
  - What if we are restricted by law and legislation from sharing information?
  - What if my client does not want their information floating about in cyberspace?
- etc.

Although these issues were true and valid, OEL needed to eliminate these concerns or barriers while still forming a strong collaborative.

**Response:** Using *loops* (like agencies providing like services to common clients) was a strong factor in easing tensions for our local providers. In laymen’s terms, Gloucester’s OEL training team devised a strategy that allowed these agencies to learn that, without using OEL and its technology, they *already* shared information and had been doing so for quite some time. OEL Groupware, Helpworks, and Factors would allow them to continue sharing specific client information using a more secure and protected arena. The OEL network administrator, using site visits, enlightened administrators and supervisors about the OEL and the technological definitions of digital identification,<sup>6</sup> encryption,<sup>7</sup> and individual certificates.<sup>8</sup> These highly secure and reliable tools would help in eliminating human error that could compromise the confidentiality of their clients. In short, OEL had no intention of forcing agencies to share information. Its vision is to provide agencies with a safe and secure ground to continue communicating with agencies in which they have already established a relationship.

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<sup>6</sup>Digital identification, like a passport, is the user’s electronic identity card.

<sup>7</sup> Encryption is the encoding of a file to prevent unauthorized users from accessing its contents. Authorized users decrypt the file by using their digital identification.

<sup>8</sup> Individual certificate is a form of identification from a trusted, outside source verifying that the user is the person he or she claims to be.

#### **Issue 4: Technology**

Technology is the baseline for the success of OEL, which is a work in progress. It is clear that social services in cyberspace have an interesting future. For example, it is likely that this technology will eventually be used to deliver direct services and community support to some people. We want to make sure that OEL provides a venue for new ideas and experiments in online social services. Technology is not in conflict with the human values that drive social services providers and programs. It can be a powerful force for bringing these values into this new century.

#### **Obstacle:**

During the development of the Gloucester OEL training and technology plan, it became evident that our community was seriously lacking not only in basic computer knowledge but also in technology in general. Building a strategy to address these issues was difficult. Many of Gloucester's provider agencies were deficient in the technological expertise needed to be successful in OEL. Some of our collaborative agencies did not possess appropriate hardware to house OEL software, and many were not able to access the Internet from their agency personal computers. Even more discouraging, several of our leading agencies were reluctant to grasp the benefits of this technology and hesitant to see the potential of its tools.

**Response:** One of the greatest assets of the OEL initiative was found to be the flexibility and autonomy of the state seed money. The state OEL director and regional managers encouraged local collaboratives to be creative in developing their individual unification. With limited training funds (\$41,000 per collaborative), the county's OEL joined efforts with the county's Institute of Technology and its Data Management Department in order to maximize resources and areas of expertise. In the summer of 2000, the Gloucester OEL filled over 250 training slots for end users. A comprehensive curriculum was developed to ensure basic computer skills and knowledge, a precursor to the more detailed software of OEL Groupware, Helpworks and Factors. This training was free to all OEL participating agencies and their workers.

Later evaluation of these basic skills classes proved to be invaluable. It was found that even individuals with prior computer experience greatly benefited from these classes. Emphasizing basic Internet, Word, and e-mail skills allowed Gloucester's OEL end users to become more comfortable and familiar with the new technology and to learn proficiency in areas that would have the most impact on their daily tasks. In addition to a comprehensive training curriculum, Gloucester freeholders and other local officials had the true value of OEL foresight. Knowing that this technology would systemically change the way agencies would be doing business, county executives broke down many of the barriers that stood in the way of local technology. Access to the internet is the "information highway" that travels straight to the core of OEL. The network administrator, working with the Data Management Office, was able to link area providers directly to the county server if they could not afford or could not provide independent Internet access. This strategy addressed several issues in the life of OEL. (1) It provided a resource to agencies that would have been left out of this initiative. (2) Offset a financial burden to those smaller agencies who could not afford Internet access at that time, and (3) Created a valued and trusted bond among all agencies (small, large, county, private non-profit, etc.) and the Gloucester freeholders.... knowing that our entire community was vested in the success of OEL.

#### **Issue 5:      Independent Efforts**

The contract of the New Jersey OEL states that each collaborative will be autonomous and managed independently. The three state departments—DHSS, DOL, DHS --jointly sponsor OEL. However, OEL is not a state government project. The state has provided leadership by giving local collaboratives access to the hardware, software, and training needed to create a local network of social service agencies. Each local network develops standards that allow it to work with other local networks. The collaboratives are defined by local needs and conditions.

**Obstacle:**

Although the unique structure of OEL has allowed for great effectiveness and vision throughout the community, it has also created an awkward transition for those agencies that serve clients in more than one collaborative. These organizational issues, along with some concerns of technology have been difficult to resolve. These areas of concerns are as follows:

- What OEL (region) is responsible for the technology and network administration maintenance?
- How do these agencies have their services reflected in more than one county collaborative?
- How do local providers with “state owned technology” incorporate OEL into their daily work?
- How does OEL deter state and local agencies from the mindset of “OEL computers” vs. “state computers?”

**Response:** Gloucester has found no blanket answer to this issue. It has been learned, however, that open dialogue among all OEL participants is effective and beneficial. OEL will continue to look at each agency and their unique circumstances on an individual basis and continue to strive for a positive outcome.

With the assistance of OEL regional managers and the vested interest of local officials and community agencies, OEL will continue to progress and flourish throughout the new millennium.

**Atlantic-Cape One EASE E-Link<sup>9</sup>**

Gerald DelRosso, Co-Chairperson

Formation of the collaborative moved much quicker than hardware, connectivity, software development, and implementation:

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<sup>9</sup> Atlantic-Cape was the pilot collaborative. As a result, the collaborative had unique experiences.

**Obstacle:**

1. Once the collaborative was formed, there were expectations that there would be tools available for the agencies to begin sharing data and services provided for mutual clients in the near future. That did not occur. The hardware architecture underwent several changes, which delayed significantly the final form that the collaborative would utilize. Even though that architecture was transparent to the collaborative members, the changes in how the members would have to use the system was not.
2. The connectivity is still a problem area for some collaborative members, even 3 years after the initiation of the process. If the agency did not have a high-speed connection, the use of Citrix<sup>10</sup> software became the rule of thumb. The use of Citrix created some local printing problems that took time to resolve. In addition, some agency's internet service providers did not provide sufficient service to maintain connectivity for extended periods of time.
3. The case management software is still not functional in the case management mode. Several agencies may use the system as a data collection tool and for contract monitoring purposes, but that is not how it was sold to the collaborative in Atlantic and Cape May Counties.<sup>11</sup>

**Response:** There was a decision to rollout the OEL system statewide before the hardware, connectivity, and software issues were operational and resolved for functionality. The position should have been to make it work in the pilot before any other county was included in the rollout. All the resources should have been dedicated to the full implementation in the pilot counties.

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<sup>10</sup> Citrix is a software application that enables an application to reside on the Citrix server rather than the individual workstation; hence, increasing connection speed for agencies using dial-up to connect to the network.

<sup>11</sup> The case management software is functional. This statement refers to the training and lack of helpdesk issues that resulted in this collaborative delaying full implementation of the software.

In addition, as problems arose in the areas of connectivity, software development, and groupware, there was no all-out effort to remedy those problems. This was the result of insufficient resources devoted to the pilot.

Finally, limiting the rollout to the two pilot counties would have minimized the pressure on the software developer in terms of expanse of statewide development. Being able to stay in the two counties would have saved the pilot approximately 12 months in the development process.

**Obstacle: Training not in line with the technology development.**

Training on several pieces of the software was completed when, in fact, the product to be used was significantly delayed. Therefore, we had given staff the ability to streamline their work only to tell them that it would not occur immediately. In some cases, the training has never been used. In some cases, decisions were made to change the software, which made the training moot. Constant change within organizations is not always negative, but with the OEL project there have been so many starts and stops and direction changes that we have generated a counterproductive atmosphere.

**Response:** The collaborative has to ensure that all the products are ready for use before any of the product training occurs. Some of the cursory training is helpful for those collaborative members that have not been exposed to computers. If there is a standard groupware that will be used, training can certainly be initiated. However, no training should occur with the case management software until the product has been demonstrated as working, the connectivity is functional, and a helpdesk is in place.

**Obstacle: Lack of Helpdesk**

During the development of OEL, the county collaborative used the county helpdesk. However, as the software products were becoming part of the business practice, there was no effort to train the appropriate staff on those issues that would affect the users having to rely on the helpdesk. In effect, the vendor became the default helpdesk. This lack of helpdesk is another symbol of the dearth of resources dedicated to making the

pilot work. As of today, we are working on the resources to man the helpdesk. One state department has said that they do not have an official helpdesk, so the county will have to support their efforts. A second state department has still not committed to a helpdesk. The third state department has agreed to train existing helpdesk staff. Finally, the county has agreed to train staff and will establish a helpdesk within the Department of Family and Community Development.

**Response:** The helpdesk function is an important part of any technology system. The average user will have trouble from time to time. The use of any technology system is supported by this assistance. If the helpdesk can act immediately, the user feels that they can experiment and will be comfortable with exploration. However, if the user has to wait days like the OEL staff has had to wait, there is a negative reinforcement, which deactivates the sense of desire to use the system. No product should be initiated unless the helpdesk and network management staff have been trained and those systems are in place and adequately staffed.

**Obstacle: Collaboration - What does it mean?**

While the state and county agreed to collaborate, the state has managed the architecture, software development, and the rollout. This has occurred because the state has the money and makes the decisions for those key elements. However, the collaborative is managed locally. That means the county has to answer for problems in the key areas: connectivity, inability to use the software, etc., yet has no decision-making responsibility.

**Response:** There should have been a committee of state and county management information system staff established before this project kicked off. Unfortunately, there have been more discussion about what the state and county systems would not let happen (firewall issues) than of what could have been done in tandem to make this project work.

## **Monmouth County One EASE E-Link**

Luis Navarro, Project Manager

### **Obstacle: Lack of Technology Infrastructure**

In the early stages of OEL development in Monmouth County, New Jersey, 70 percent of the service providers had no technology plan and a very limited technology capacity. A typical service provider had several computers across the organization with no Internet access and no local or wide area network. Caseworker skills were limited to basic word-processing, and most workers had no web navigation skills.

**Response:** Through our administrative structure we are able to provide limited consultant services on network solutions so that members of the collaborative receive an assessment of their technology capacity, including hardware and software, and an assessment of their user skill levels with specific recommendations on how to improve them.

We have developed an Online University to teach collaborative members various software applications such as MS Office 97/2000, Windows98, Internet Explorer, and others.

In addition, we have established a training curriculum and provided onsite training to further develop users skills.

### **III. Actions that Could Facilitate State and Local Efforts to Modernize Systems**

#### **A. State of New Jersey**

William G. Kowalski, Director, Office of One EASE E-Link

##### **Stakeholders “Buy-In”:**

Service coordination and integration must be identified as a priority issue with program leadership at the federal, state, and local levels. Thinking “out of the box” must be promoted from the highest level. Federal and state departments should be directed to take a holistic approach to service delivery, which would require the sharing of information when it is in the best interest of the consumer. Programs must drive the technology. If program administrators are not convinced of the need to collaborate it will never happen, even if it is promoted within information technology (IT).

##### **Funding of common Initiatives and Infrastructure:**

The present federal funding process for IT projects must be revised. The process is cumbersome, extremely time consuming, inflexible, categorical, and unresponsive to the rapid change in technology. IT funding needs to be non-prescriptive and allow for an uncomplicated cost allocation process across funding streams. The collapsing of funding streams would be ideal. This also applies to state funding of IT projects. There should be funding incentives for the development and operation of systems that meet industry standards, foster data sharing, and interoperability.

##### **Confidentially:**

There are numerous laws and regulations pertaining to confidentiality that need to be codified in order to achieve some consistency in confidentiality policies. This is a pressing issue that needs to be addressed for data sharing to occur at a meaningful level. In the absence of a non-conflicting confidentiality policy, IT funding and policy should encourage industry standards for security such as but not limited to PKI.

### **Interoperability Standards and Standardized IT Architectures:**

The federal and state government need to establish inter-operability standards that will provide for consistency in data and information systems requirements. Funding should be predicated on the standards.

### **B. Atlantic-Cape One EASE E-Link<sup>12</sup>**

Gerald DelRosso, Co-Chairperson

#### **What should have happened:**

A key problem with the implementation of the OEL strategy was a lack of adequate leadership, planning, and resource allocation. A project of this magnitude can only succeed if there is a clear vision. It requires a comprehensive network design before any decisions are made as to software, hardware, and telecommunications. Managers with a high level of technical expertise should have designed this project. As such the project became fragmented. With no overall leadership, decisions were made by one group that were incompatible with other parts of the project. For example, the case management software was chosen because of the functionality of the software as seen by the human services community. However, it became apparent only after the purchase of the software, that the software program required enormous processing power from servers and a lot of bandwidth for adequate connections to remote sites.

We should have developed two tracks operating on parallel courses. For the human service agencies (the collaborative), the most important components are managing similar clients, sharing client data, communicating through technology, developing useful programmatic and fiscal reports, and plotting a course of action with other service providers. However, the creation of the architecture, software development, connectivity and telecommunications, a trained helpdesk, and network administration have to occur first and be totally independent of the collaborative in the early stages of the project. These two tracks should not merge until the latter technology components

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<sup>12</sup> Atlantic-Cape was the pilot collaborative. As a result, the collaborative had unique experiences

are field tested and proven to be effective. Once the field-testing is completed, the tracks should merge and it is at that point that training of the users should be initiated.

If the lead agencies are government, it is recommended that field-testing be done prior to including the private nonprofit agencies in any discussions. Generally, the states and counties have financial and legal relationships that allow for sharing data, clients, etc. The private non-profit agencies are more reluctant about these relationships even if they receive government funds. Therefore, their involvement should begin once the systemic issues are functional and a product and its use can be demonstrated. Their "buy-in" then is based on a field-tested product that can be seen and used by agency staff. During the development stages there have been so many changed directions that it was difficult to keep the private non-profit agencies fully engaged. In addition, the private and non-profit agencies have little outside resources to add to the process.

### **C. Monmouth County One EASE E-Link**

Luis Navarro, Project Manager

### **Integration of MIS Systems**

A partnership is needed between county and state officials in order to develop an integrated human services data system in New Jersey that will effectively serve multiple needs, including reporting and accountability, management and decision-making, program monitoring, policy development, and evaluation. County and state officials both need to be involved at decision-making levels.

### **Conclusion**

In August of 1995 when New Jersey's DHS proposed the Community Link Network, which evolved into One EASE E-Link , it realized three challenges:

"First, [DHS] seeks to implement a project that has no precedent in terms of the proportion of agencies and organizations that would be networked together, the range of databases to be integrated, and the extent of the program participation at both the state and local level.

Second, several important factors that will influence the degree of difficulty in achieving the department's goals and the level of resources needed are currently unknown. Two important unknown elements are the ability of state databases to integrate (and state agencies to allow integration), and the capacity of local providers to achieve higher level of cooperation and technology usage than previously achieved.

And, third, the critical mission of DHS - to help people in need and to bring to bear the right mix of services, in the right amount, to make them as self sufficient as quickly as possible - takes high levels of coordination, commitment, and leadership. It is also clear that a new service delivery system, of the scale and scope discussed herein, will place significant demands on the agencies involved at both the state and local level. However, it is for all the reasons cited in this proposal that DHS should undertake this project, but should initiate it through an approach which allows it to define and refine its parameters."<sup>13</sup>

As shown in this paper, considerable energy and effort has resulted in the development of the OEL statewide electronic network. As stated, this technology initiative provides the infrastructure for community-based, county-led collaboratives to integrate, meld, and support social service providers in a secure network environment.

The OEL project has made great progress but challenges remain. Issues of database integration, federal and state confidentiality regulations, technical obsolescence, software delays, categorical funding, and lack of helpdesk support all continue to challenge and confound participants at all levels. Yet, despite all these challenges and those yet to be defined, the OEL vision and network thrives. The OEL concept makes sense on an intuitive level. "Share resources and information in order to maximize

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<sup>13</sup> New Jersey Community Link 1995; p. 21.

services to the families of New Jersey." It is a vision that will continue to require energy, technological evolution, commitment, funding, and, most of all, collaborative trust. The infrastructure may change, the software may be replaced, and PDA's<sup>14</sup> may eventually replace the personal computer workstations purchased with the original seed money; but the vision will continue to call to arms the enlightened and the dedicated to trust their instincts and to pursue and actualize the dream.

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<sup>14</sup> PDA is a handheld personal digital assistant, such as a Palm Pilot.